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ON PAGE 1-A

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Radio war possible if 'Marti' starts up militantly

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U.S. satellite and aircraft photo reconnaissance indicates that Cuba has several East German super-transmitters ready to disrupt both radio and television communications in much of the eastern United States and some parts of Canada, Mexico, and Central America if the United States and Cuba get into electronic warfare over U.S. news broadcasts to Cuba.

The Reagan administration, threatened with a radio war by Fidel Castro, has reached the stage of the crunch over its proposed "surrogate home broadcasting" service — Radio Marti — aimed at breaking through the Communist Cuban censorship.

Originally, Radio Marti was seen as a hard-hitting propaganda weapon with start-up broadcasts featuring, for example, casualty lists of the growing dead and wounded Cubans from the Communists' expeditionary force on behalf of the Marxist governments in Angola and Ethiopia.

A debate over how the service is to be run has dogged the project since Congress voted it into existence Oct. 4, 1983. Congress compromised the argument by putting Radio Marti under the United States Information Service (USIS), but also reporting to the Director of Voice of America, instead of under the semi-autonomous International Board of Broadcasting that runs Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty.

The controversy over how militant its programming should be has made staff recruiting difficult and resulted in the resignation of its first Cuban-American director.

The decision on how to proceed has now reached the National Security Council level at the White House. One participant in the decision-making there said, "One thing is for sure: If we go on the air, we want to stay on. It would be a major victory for Castro if we started up and then had to back off."

The effort to present a realistic picture of world events and happenings inside Cuba to the Cuban people on medium-wave radio over the heads of their the Castro regime has been, from the beginning, highly controversial on Capitol Hill.

Radio Marti, named after a famous 19th century Cuban revolutionary against Spain who lived for many years in New York, is ready to go on the air now.

A tentative startup date was set for May 20, anniversary of the Cuban Revolution. Congress appropriated \$10 million in 1983 and another \$8.5 million has been voted this fiscal year to fund staff, eventually 187 writers, editors and announcers. They have been making "dry runs" since January.

Radio Marti was expected to function like Radio Free Europe, which broadcasts to the Soviet satellites in Central Europe in their own languages, and Radio Liberty, which carries a news and commentary service into the Soviet Union in its various languages.

A bitter debate is raging inside the administration on how to handle the new situation. One option is to go on the air as originally intended and, if the Castro government retaliates against U.S. broadcasting, the United States would turn on powerful new military transmitters in the Florida keys and Guatemala that could black out all communications on the island.

There are even voices in the administration calling for a direct air attack using "smart" — electronically guided — bombing techniques to "take out" the transmitters if Castro uses them to interfere with American communications.

But other officials are calling for the United States to back off the entire project.